

The marginalization of the 'less-educated' is hurting Kentucky

A few weeks ago, a woman from Elizabethtown Community and Technical College, a KCTCS institution, spoke to a roomful of high school students in Elizabethtown about opportunities at ECTC.

Afterwards, a couple of sharp, clean-cut high school guys sheepishly approached her, made sure no one was listening, and said, "Look, we were ashamed to ask about this in front of the other students, but we really like working with our hands and want to be plumbers. Does ECTC have a plumbing program?"

More recently, at a high school graduation ceremony in Kentucky, before receiving their diplomas, students were openly divided into three groups: college, military and non-college.

Shame on us — all of us — who even once in our lives ridiculed anyone who works with his hands, has a blue collar, uses tools, or wears coveralls, work boots, gloves, a work uniform or a hard hat. Let's just stop it.

Instead, let's adopt the radical idea that in a cut-throat global economy, Kentucky needs all types of workers. And, frankly, most of them don't need a four-year college degree to make a good living and support a family.

Above-average wages

Make no mistake, Kentucky desperately needs to produce more bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees.

But let's not drive those numbers by inferring, as some parents, teachers, guidance counselors and college graduates do, that you will be a second-class citizen unless you get a four-year college degree.

Our value as human beings should not be measured by such factors as degrees, salary, or title — and neither should our economic worth.

How many college graduates these days are working lower-paying hourly jobs because they can't find a salaried position in their field?

And how many high school and technical college graduates are working in jobs they love and earning a



GUEST COMMENT

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good salary with benefits?

Kentucky's per capita wage is a paltry \$29,000 a year, among the lowest in the nation.

But according to the Kentucky Association of Manufacturers' most recent wage and benefits survey, the average manufacturing salary in the commonwealth is \$45,000 with good benefits.

Lose the condescending attitude

Still, hundreds of these great jobs are going unfilled every month (see www.kamcareers.com) because some of our well-intentioned leaders and influencers dismiss technical careers and look down their noses at those whose economic futures would be better served in them.

So the next time you muster up a condescending attitude when you meet a plumber, consider this: In early June, we spoke about Kentucky's work-force challenges to the Lebanon, Ky., Chamber of Commerce.

Some of those present told us about a wealthy man who had just built a brand new country club and championship 18-hole golf course for the community. Is the wealthy man a doctor or lawyer? No, he's a plumber.

Here's a message to all of you would-be welders, industrial maintenance technicians, tool-and-die makers, assembly workers, and plumbers: Kentucky needs you. We value you. And we want to pay you very, very well.

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